

Soldiers *Online*

The Army's *Most Famous* Doctor

Story by
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The young Dr. Walter Reed (*above*) joined the Army Medical Corps looking for stability. What he got was a career of adventure and remarkable achievement, which included research into illness among soldiers in Cuban tent camps (*below*).

BORN in a remote area of the middle peninsula of Virginia 150 years ago this month, Walter Reed was the son of a Methodist minister, with an early education that was typical for his times.

The Civil War that began when he was 9 years old called two of his brothers to the service of the Confederacy. After the war, he was allowed to enroll with his brothers at the University of Virginia, but following a year of study he realized that his father could not support all three boys for the full course of their studies.

Reed approached the medical faculty and proposed that if he could pass all the necessary exams, they should award him a medical degree.

Over the course of the next

year, he demonstrated an unusual capacity for hard work and application. When he passed the exams before his 18th birthday, Walter Reed became the youngest person ever to be granted a medical degree from the University of Virginia.

In the 1800s, the medical education system in this country was not nearly as structured as today. Reed, who could have gone into practice, knew he needed more experience and training. He went to New York City to continue his studies and earn a second M.D. degree from Bellevue Hospital.

He worked in New York City for several years, but after falling in love with a girl in North Carolina where his father was preaching, he looked to the Army Medical Corps for stability and guaranteed income. What he got was a career of adventure, excitement and remarkable achievement.

After a brief initial assignment in the East, the 24-year-old Reed was assigned to the Western frontier. Like

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military families today, the soldier reported to his assignment alone; his wife would join him later.

In the fall of 1876, just seven years after the completion of the transcontinental railroad, 20-year-old Emilie Reed rode the train alone across country. After meeting in San Francisco, the Reeds traveled by ship to San Diego and endured a 23-day buckboard ride over 500 trackless miles to Fort Lowell, Ariz.

Reed was the only doctor for miles around and cared for soldiers, family members, civilians and Indians. Over the next 18 years the Reeds moved about 15 times, from one frontier to the next, interspersed with assignments back East.

A modern goal of medical education is to instill in each new doctor the desire and thrust for continued learning and acquisition of new skills. More than a century before the term was coined and widely used, Walter Reed became a model for life-long learning, and his achievements set a benchmark for his and future generations. Despite what one of his biographers felt was more than ample opportunity to

stagnate during early isolated assignments, Reed's curiosity kept him focused on new challenges and intellectual growth.

He made contacts with the local medical community, when there was one, and sought out new educational opportunities. During an assignment at Fort McHenry in Baltimore, Md., he took classes at Johns Hopkins Univer-



Walter Reed was born 150 years ago this month in this house in Gloucester County, Va. He went on to receive medical degrees from the University of Virginia and New York's Bellevue Hospital.

Walter Reed Army

sity, becoming familiar with the new science of bacteriology.

After additional tours in the West and South, he returned to the East Coast in 1890 and again took courses at Johns Hopkins. In 1893 he was assigned to the faculty of the new Army Medical School and, at 41, was promoted to major.

After the brief Spanish-American War in 1898, Reed was chosen to head an investigation into the reasons why more soldiers had died from diseases, mostly typhoid, than had died on the battlefield. After a year of travel and study, the U.S. Army Typhoid Board made observations and recommendations that greatly improved the health of the Army.

Following the Spanish surrender, plans called for the Army to occupy Cuba for four years. Yellow fever had been a morbid visitor to the Caribbean and coastal United States for many years and threatened nonimmune members of the Army.

Debate had raged



With the aid of American and Cuban physicians, and of soldiers who volunteered to be test subjects, Reed's Yellow Fever Board proved that mosquitos transmitted the deadly disease.

throughout the medical community over the cause of yellow fever and the ways in which it was spread.

Havana was Cuba's largest city and was the seat of the occupying forces, but it was a cesspool of disease. Despite the dramatic success of the Army's sanitarians in cleaning up Havana with reduction of many diseases, yellow fever remained unconquered and deadly.

In May 1900 Army Surgeon General George Miller Sternberg appointed Reed to head a board of three contract physicians to study infectious diseases in Cuba with special attention to yellow fever.

Reed and Dr. James Carroll met the other members, Drs. Aristides Agramonte and Jesse Lazear, at Columbia Barracks, Cuba, in late June of 1900.

What followed over the next 16 months was arguably the most extraordinary clinical research ever conducted by the Army Medical Department.

With the assistance of Cuban and American medical personnel, and with support from the Army's leaders, the Yellow Fever Board proved that the *Aedes Aegypti* mosquito transmitted yellow fever among humans. Their research also revealed that yellow



In May 1909 Reed's name was memorialized when the Army opened Walter Reed General Hospital — now Walter Reed Army Medical Center — in north-west Washington, D.C.

fever was caused by an ultramicroscopic agent in the blood, the first evidence of viral disease in man.

The board had also been the first research group in history to get the informed consent of their experimental subjects.

Unlike today, when it takes months or even years for the results of new medical research to have an impact on the general population, the discoveries of the Yellow Fever Board had an immediate impact on the Army and the people of Cuba. Orders were issued concerning mosquito control, and were carried out under the supervision of MAJ William C. Gorgas.

Within just a few months yellow fever disappeared from Havana, where it had been in constant residence for at least 150 years. Several years later these same techniques were applied in Panama to help control yellow fever and malaria, and greatly assisted in the completion of the Panama Canal.

Reed did not live long enough to see the complete impact of his work. He died in Washington, D.C., on Nov. 23, 1902, following surgery for appendicitis. His burial in Arlington National Cemetery returned him to the soil of his native Virginia. Emilie survived him by 48 years and was buried beside him when she died in 1950.

In May 1909, Reed's name was memorialized when the Army named its new hospital in northwest Washington, D.C., Walter Reed General Hospital.

In 1951, on the 100th anniversary of Reed's birth, the hospital was renamed Walter Reed Army Medical Center. Today it remains one of the most recognized medical institutions in the world, a monument to an Army doctor who dedicated his life to learning so that he could help others. □

